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What A Local Church Has Done

By the Rev. J. W. MAGRUDER

The Missionary Society of the
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Rindge Literature Department
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John F. Goucher
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A Mother of Churches

A LOCAL church in a great city has accomplished something if it has remained downtown without running down grade, and if it has become a contributor to missions without itself becoming a mission dependent upon a missionary society. That is a part of the achievement of Wesley Chapel, Cincinnati. The mother and grandmother of nearly every Methodist Church in Cincinnati and vicinity, "Old Wesley" all but sacrificed her own life in giving birth to her many children, and in feeding and clothing a swarm of grandchildren who were not always overscrupulous about living upon her bounty. The time came when she reached the poverty line, and to save herself from eviction she was compelled to put a mortgage of $10,000 upon her old home, and the property sank into decay.

A Postponed Funeral

To-day, to use an expression of Dr. Buckley, she has "renewed the longevity of her youth," and is setting the pace for her numerous offspring in a way which makes them rather proud of their lineage. Her funeral has been postponed. All talk about turning her into a mission has ceased. She insists upon continuing as a church. She

knows by experience how much of truth is in the rather shocking declaration of the Rev. George L. McNutt, that poor people of the self-respecting sort "may go to hell, but they will not go to a mission." The poor do not want a mission any more than the rich do; in fact, not so much so, for some of the rich want missions—"for poor people." Wesley Chapel persists in maintaining her church standing. With a seating capacity exceeded by only three other Protestant churches in the city, and with an enrollment of 718 full members, she has become a factor to be reckoned with. Last year she paid into the Missionary Society as much as all the other ten downtown churches and $13 over, or a total of $1,060.

Increasing Benevolences

The beginning of better days came when she cleared off her mortgage indebtedness, and hit upon the idea of obeying the rule of her own Discipline against "borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them." At that time the amount of her contributions to the Missionary Society was not a matter of record. But later, in 1889, I find that her total benevolences amounted to $629, of which $396 was for missions. In 1892, at the end of the pastorate of my honored predecessor, the total benevolence had risen to $1,036, of which $500 was for missions. Then came the panic of 1893, when there would have been an inevitable slump had not the people nerved themselves to heroic giving; and twenty-seven of them organized into a Christian Stewards' League, after the plan of Thomas Kane, the well-known Chicago "layman." The total benevolences kept on rising

until they reached $1,830; of which $576 was for missions. In May, 1895, the final feature in the evolution of their financial plan was added, by supplementing the old subscription plan with the now much-mooted tithing system.

How a Movement Started

Little did anyone at that time imagine they were inaugurating a scheme which would erelong be of interest to Methodists and multitudes of Protestants throughout the world. It began at a little dinner party given by one of the official members and his wife to the pastor and two other officials and their wives. The question of church finance was introduced—the inevitable topic; for where two or three members of an official board are gathered together, there is the subject of finance sure to be in the midst of them. But one of the party, who was "a lawyer and an honest man," had something new to offer. The struggle for existence which, he declared, had been exhausting the energies of Wesley Chapel for nearly twenty years was not peculiar to her. Nor was it due to her being a downtown church whose well-to-do members had gone to heaven or to the suburbs. The same shaky or insolvent condition was characteristic of all churches, urban, suburban, and rural. Scarcely one was in easy financial condition. Nearly all have chronic deficiencies, and resort to special collections and catchpenny schemes to meet their annual budget. There was something radically wrong. Either the great Head of the Church is lacking in business sense or else he has some kind of a system of finance. "Now," said he, "I have been looking into this matter and studying the Scripture from Genesis to Reve-

lation; and I find that the tithe, which thousands of Christians everywhere have covenanted to set apart for religious and benevolent purposes, was not intended to be scattered broadcast according to individual notion or caprice; but in every instance mentioned in the Scripture 'the whole tithe' was to be brought 'into the storehouse,' that is, the church, to which every tither belongs."

One Man with a Conviction

I need scarcely say that we at once withstood this lawyer to his face, and denounced his "Hebrew old-clothes philosophy." Not one of the stock objections to the tithing system was allowed to go by default. We exposed its narrowness, its burdensomeness, its inequity, its impracticability; it was legalism and literalism gone mad. As for ourselves, we were no longer "under the law, but under grace." His final reply was "You may lean to your understandings, if you like, just as all the people have been doing. But your church will sink into poverty and pauperism, devoid of spiritual life and power, subsisting on oyster soup and ice cream and pink tea, clothed in crazy quilts and the left-over remnants of people's pocket books. For my part, I am tired of this tramping in the wilderness. Anaks or no Anaks, I have made up my mind that, beginning next Sunday, I will pay the price which all must pay if we ever are to cross over into the promised land." The upshot of it was that the rest of the party followed this lead, the pastor bringing up the rear; the understanding being that as Methodists we believed in experimental religion and would subject the tithing system to the test of experience, and that we would accept the challenge, "Prove me now herewith,

saith Jehovah of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

The official board were slow about sanctioning the innovation. But when they came to understand that the advocates of the new system were not proposing to supersede the old subscription plan, but only to supplement it, and that they did not set themeselves up as conscience-keepers for others, but left each one free to decide for himself before God whether he would continue under the old subscription plan or adopt the tithing system, all opposition vanished.

Results of Tithing

You know something of the result. The contributions of Wesley Chapel to missions alone in 1895 were $576; in 1901 the amount rose to $1,060. And the total income for one year from this people, none of whom were rich, and perhaps six of whom were able to own their own homes, while the rank and file were wage earners, casual workers, or dependent poor, amounted to more than $9,000. The tithe book shows that last year, out of 769 members and probationers, only 162 were tithing; and of these 12 were children, 105 women, and 45 men. It is interesting to note here that the average income of every man, woman, and child in the United States is estimated at $300; the average tithe therefore would be $30. The treasurer's book at Wesley Chapel shows that the average amount paid by each tither there in 1901 was $31.29. If all the 769 members had been tithing at the same rate the total income would have been $24,062; or enough

to pay their present current expenses, and support the entire associated charities of Cincinnati, and to keep an army of 180 Bible readers in the field in India, China, and Japan. What a factor in the civic and religious life of the city would such a church become! And what a missionary factor at home and abroad!

Strength and Simplicity in Church Work

Now, the effect of this system of tithing, supplementing the old subscription plan, was not to do away with the literature and sermons from missionary secretaries and bishops, or the missionary organizations, home and foreign, in Sunday school and church, among children, young people, and old people. It only simplified and strengthened their work. When Bishop Thoburn came to Wesley Chapel in 1896 to preach a missionary sermon it seemed to be a new sensation to him not to have a collection to take. The fact is, this system transforms all these men and means into missionary educational institutions instead of peripatetic collecting agencies. The apostle Paul declared that he was not sent to baptize, but to preach the Gospel, and he thanked God for it. How thankful all of us would be not to be sent to collect moneys, but to give ourselves wholly to our business as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers!

A Campaign of Education

But a word of caution here. No system, even though divinely inspired, will work itself! The law of the tithe is no more self-operative than is the law of the Sabbath. As a means of educa-

tion at Wesley Chapel, we resorted to Quarterly Conferences on the subject of tithing. And every Tuesday evening the pastor had a class to which was assigned temporarily all new members, and there he instructed them on at least three points which I wish here to emphasize explicitly:

Giving Essential to Christian Life

1. "We seek not yours, but you." The Church can get along without any man's money. The man himself can get along without it. Indeed, if he is to get along at all in his religious life it must be by surrendering at least a portion of his money. For no man can be a Christian unless he gives. If a pastor is true to his people he must say to them frankly that they cannot by any possibility be Christians unless liberality abounds in their lives along with all the other graces of Christian character.

God's Absolute Ownership

2. If we acknowledge the obligation to tithe our incomes it must be on the basis of what in law is known as "the right of eminent domain"; in accordance with which no man can claim aught of the things which he possesses as his own (Acts iv, 32)—it is God's own; and he is at liberty to do with it not as he pleases, but only as God pleases. And under certain circumstances God may please that he shall give up all his possessions. The apostles "forsook all" and followed Jesus. Paul "suffered the loss of all things." The disciples at Pentecost "brought all their possessions and laid them at the apostles' feet and had all things in common." That is to say, they

did what hundreds and thousands of men did during the Spanish-American war—forsook fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and houses and lands, yea, and their own lives; all without any assurance of more than thirteen dollars a month and board and clothes in this world, and with no assurance whatever in the world to come. But the giving up of all one's possessions obtains only in exceptional emergencies. Under ordinary circumstances men discharge their whole duty as citizens not by surrendering life and fortune, but by paying only a fraction of their income as a tax for the support of the government. In like manner, God does not ordinarily exact from us all that we possess, but only a tithe of our income, as a tax for the support of his kingdom in the world.

A World-wide Kingdom

3. The object of a tithe is not to support a church, but to propagate a world-wide kingdom. The church which tithes merely for self-support violates the spirit of the law and will be killed by the letter. Even if the people were to "bring the whole tithe into the storehouse" there would not be room enough to receive it. The church would be embarrassed by its very wealth, as was actually the case once in the time of Ezra, when it is recorded that there was ten times as much money as they knew what to do with. A tithing church cannot be self-centered and greedy, as the Jewish Church came to be; it must in the very nature of things be self-sacrificing, aggressive, catholic, and missionary. Only thus can it find an outlet for its superabundant income.

Be it understood, however, that the church which abounds in tithes and offerings is not necessarily a revival church. The churchmen of Judaism in their most degenerate days were noted for a liberality which would put the average Protestant to shame. They scrupulously tithed their entire income, even to the "mint and anise and cumin," but neglected "the weightier matters of the law." It is a singular fact, however, that, despite the religious degeneracies of the Jews and the age-long persecutions which they have suffered, no other people have enjoyed such extraordinary prosperity. And I am inclined to believe with President Bashford "that the financial success of the Jews is a constant miracle—a proof that obedience along even one line of righteousness brings its consequent prosperity." But if, along with the obligation of tithing, "the weightier matters of the law," such as "judgment, mercy, and faith," were fulfilled it would lay the foundation for the greatest revival of religion the world has ever seen. It would finance the Church and the kingdom and send missionaries into every part of the world, so that for the first time in world history the Gospel would be preached to every creature. And we might expect to see a fulfillment of the motto of the Student Volunteer movement: "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation."

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